Civic Melancholy: Urban Landscape in an Australian Regional Context

Jamie Holcombe
Civic Melancholy: Urban Landscape in an Australian Regional Context

Jamie Holcombe, Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia

Abstract: My research suggests that most photographs are inherently melancholic, and that this is driven by the contextual relationship between the representation, and subsequent interpretation of an image’s content. My subsequent photographic arts practice explores this concept with particular reference to urban landscape in regional Australia, and employs strategies that blend irony with sadness by juxtaposing the aesthetics and the content of the images. Whilst the compositions are deliberate and aesthetically disciplined, the subject matter is inherently less elegant. Even without people, only places, such images primarily allude to the transience of human life. The consequence is to elicit a sense of the melancholy, rather than the traditional landscape’s more customary mood of sentimentality. Such imagery merges the urban landscape with social documentary photography, by archiving a cultural and social record of people and events, resulting in a kind of social landscape that is questioning and challenging to the viewer, as well as provoking contemplation and reflection. Ultimately, it can empower us, by reminding us that our urban “civic” environment is a consequence of our collective behaviour.

Keywords: Photography, Fine Art, Melancholy, Regional Australia, Urban Landscape, Social Documentary, Social Landscape

Civic Melancholy is a body of creative work by the author that explores the concept that photographs can elicit a sense of melancholy in the viewer. This project comprises a series of exhibitions of large format, high-resolution digital photographic prints depicting urban landscape in regional Australian locations. Some of these images illustrate this paper, and more can be seen at www.civicmelancholy.net.

This paper locates the project within a theoretical and historical discourse concerning melancholy in the photograph. It establishes that the body of work diverges from traditional landscape in that it is not grounded in mere sentimentality, but also functions as social documentary, by questioning and challenging the viewer, and importantly, leaving room for contemplation and reflection.

It would seem appropriate at this point to clarify some of the terms used in this research. Firstly, “civic” generally relates to urban environments, and particularly the activities of people in relation to those places. “Civic” acts as a descriptor for an organised community that makes its mark of progress on a place. It implies a civilised collective that might be equally accountable for its failures as its successes.¹

Secondly, the term “melancholy” is not new to critical discourse about art and photography, and in this context, it does not generally embrace the somewhat older definitions of the word, such as those that refer to the mental condition known as Melancholia, which is more directly

¹ Apple Computer Dictionary, version 2.1.2 (80.3) (USA: Apple, 2009).
linked to clinical depression. Of more relevance here is the characteristic of melancholy that
connects with reflection and contemplation, which can link memories of past experiences
with present events. In the art context, the materiality or object of such reflection can be
substituted with the representative content of an image, and, as such, contribute to prompting
a melancholic emotion.\(^2\)

Definitions of “melancholy” such as “a deep, pensive and long-lasting sadness”\(^3\) and
“sober thoughtfulness”\(^4\) are more pertinent in the art context, and subsequently the author’s
body of creative work, as they encompass a broader interpretation to include profound
thought. Thus, for the purposes of these investigations, and in the broader art discourse, the
term “melancholy” is a “controllable emotion”\(^5\) that includes everything from abject sadness
to that quiet, reflective moment basking alone in the warm window light on a cold winter’s
day. As such, it embraces the notion that not all melancholy is unwanted or uncomfortable.
Indeed, in the case of photography, when an image elicits melancholy, it is arguably also
poignant, in that it can be “acutely and passionately felt” by “evoking a keen sense of sadness
and regret.”\(^6\)

Thirdly, the term “landscape” is actually a cultural construct, originally referring to a
pictorial representation of a vista, specifically of natural scenery, although these days the
term is also used to refer to the scenery itself.\(^7\) Soon buildings and other elements that provide
interest or a sense of scale became more acceptable, not the least of which is people. Eventu-
ally, as the genre reinvented itself, sub-categories of landscape became commonplace,
such as cityscapes and urban landscapes.

The primary objective of the traditional landscape has been one of aesthetics over moral
or social issues to provide a faithful record of a pleasing view. Indeed the International Centre
for Photography termed traditional landscape photographs as those that “acknowledge the
beauty and grandeur of nature in a straight forward manner and use technique to reveal scale,
colour, and detail in a way that gives the viewer a sense of actually looking at the scene.”\(^8\)

It is this very notion that underpins the success of Ansell Adams, who is the repeatedly
acknowledged 20\(^{th}\) Century master of the photographic landscape. Acclaimed as producing
the “definitive pictorial statement on the American western landscape”, his grand vistas
serve to reinforce our romantic ideals of nature.\(^9\) Adams pioneered the system of high quality
exposure control called the Zone System, and was an expert in the darkroom. The result was
that no book reproduction or projected image could come close to conveying the tonal
qualities of his original print, so much so that his images are coveted as being as close as
we can get to actually being there when the photograph was taken.\(^10\)

\(^3\) Apple Computer Dictionary, op. cit.
\(^5\) Brady, Emily, and Haapala, Arto. op. cit.
\(^6\) Apple Computer Dictionary, op. cit.
\(^8\) Mason, Jerry, Broecker, William L., Mason, Michael (eds), ICP Encyclopedia of Photography. New York: Crown
\(^9\) Ibid p. 16.
\(^10\) London, Barbara, Upton, John, Stone, Jim, Kobre, Kenneth, Brill, Betsy (eds). Photography (8th Ed.). USA:
During the 1960s, almost forty years after Adams had produced his first photographic portfolio, the notable photographer Diane Arbus spent some time taking photographs in a nudist camp (fig. 1). Whilst arguably still a celebration of nature, the images she produced were clearly more about the human presence within the environment depicted. Arbus once commented on the fact that the camp had a rule against staring. You could look, but if you stared you would risk expulsion. A photograph, on the other hand, allows us to stare, as if to give us licence to extend our gaze beyond a mere “look”, welcoming a scrutiny that we ordinarily wouldn’t condone.

![Figure 1: Husband and Wife in the Woods at a Nudist Camp, N.J., 1963, Dianne Arbus](image)

Later again, in the 1980s, US state arts funding agencies became more supportive of exhibitions related to minority groups. Numerous right wing groups accused these agencies of supporting “enemies within”, such as, according to writer Deborah Bright, “immigrants, those on public assistance, young unemployed black men, unwed mothers, and gay men and lesbians”. These right wing groups were particularly angry about homoerotic art, and considered images of bodies or body parts to be pornographic, sacrilegious and blasphemous.

---

One of their most notorious attacks was on the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In one instance Mapplethorpe’s exhibition catalogue was even torn up on the floor of US Congress.

Mapplethorpe’s photographs provide us with a link between the landscapes of Ansel Adams and the more morally controversial imagery of Arbus. Mapplethorpe’s prints possessed the same kind of quality as Adams’, to the point that the sheer beauty of the image could override the content. The tonal qualities, the light, and the compositions all held similar virtuosity to an Adams landscape in that a reproduction simply doesn’t do justice to an original print. Yet the viewer soon realises that the difference is in the moral and ethical challenges that Mapplethorpe’s images thrust upon us, as if to demand a reaction. In the case of the infamous image titled *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980) (fig. 2), which depicts a man’s penis protruding from the fly of a business suit, Mapplethorpe’s opponents would have found it very challenging to suddenly have the graphic voice of a homosexual minority quite literally in their face.

![Image of Man in Polyester Suit](image)

*Figure 2: Man in Polyester Suit, 1980, Robert Mapplethorpe*

Traditional landscape photography, on the other hand, doesn’t set out to challenge the viewer, preferring to simply reaffirm our appreciation of the beauty of nature. Thus, when a photograph such as *Rancho Seco Nuclear Plant, Sacramento County, California* (1983)

---

by John Pfahl (fig. 3), initially lures us to the surface of the image with the traditional aesthetic qualities of a landscape, but soon contradicts itself by depicting a nuclear power plant in the distance, it exhibits similar qualities to Mapplethorpe’s technique of combining the beauty of the image with the shock of the content. At about the same time that Mapplethorpe was producing his most controversial images, The International Centre of Photography, in its Encyclopedia of Photography, made the somewhat casual definition of a photograph that says, “look at what has been done to this landscape”, rather than, “look at what this landscape is”, as being not strictly a landscape, but more a social documentary.\(^\text{13}\)

![Image of a nuclear power plant](image.png)

**Figure 3: Rancho Seco Nuclear Plant, Sacramento County, California, 1983, John Pfahl**

Photography has long been employed to record a social documentary, by archiving the people, events and artefacts that represent a cultural and social record of the times. Robert Frank’s famous depiction of a one thousand mile journey across the United States in 1958, *The Americans*, was a photo-essay that revealed a distinctly personal and idiosyncratic viewpoint of America. His photographs of alienated, lonely Americans engaged in banal activities in the most ordinary public settings were glimpses of an American sadness and disenchantment that had never been represented before. The famous curator of photography John Szarkowski once wrote, “this book challenged the way Americans were supposed to look….. It was about whole segments of life that nobody had thought (were) the proper concern of art”.\(^\text{14}\)

---

\(^\text{13}\) Mason, Jerry et al. op. cit. p. 292.

However, whilst *The Americans* was regarded as a distinctly important and influential work, it raised considerable public uproar because it was read as cynical and uncompromising.\(^{15}\) Perhaps some viewers didn’t like what they saw because they were reacting to Frank’s essentially melancholic interpretation that simply cut too close to the bone, disclosing what they hadn’t wanted to see about themselves. Stripping away the gloss that we tend to perhaps subconsciously apply to our environment can be challenging, as we’re seeing the fine detail of our own space more as it is, than as we’d like it.

![Figure 4: Charlestown, 1955, Robert Frank](image1.jpg)

Much art is at its best when raising questions, rather than simply offering solutions. In other words, artists often do a good job of alerting their audiences to an issue by challenging viewers to confront their own responses to the work. This approach is arguably more successful because, in a way, this kind of artwork isn’t complete until it has been viewed. This is because we as viewers interpret what we see, and so bring our own meanings to images, and this is particularly pertinent to the photographic image. Perhaps because of photography’s literal relationship with what it records, the first thing we tend to notice is the content, or subject matter. This stands to reason given that most photographs are taken with the prime intent of showing a representation of the original subject matter, and so we are directly plugged into the content, and simultaneously more subconsciously influenced by the way that content is presented visually.

To illustrate this idea that, as Marcel Duchamp famously put it, “every spectator is the co-author of the work”, we can return to the work of Diane Arbus. Arbus was heavily criticised at the time for apparent exploitation of disadvantaged, or sometimes just plain different

people in her images, but the criticism was laced with less politically correct terminology, accusing her of documenting “freaks”\(^\text{16}\) “on the fringe of normal society”\(^\text{17}\). However, getting back to the notion of an image offering the viewer a challenge rather than a solution, it was outbursts such as these that ultimately revealed that Arbus’ work drew many viewers into a powerful confrontation with their own preconceptions and prejudices. Interestingly, Arbus’ photographs of supposedly “normal” people were also controversial, their unrelenting directness exposing the cracks in peoples’ public personas.\(^\text{18}\)

The image titled *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, New York City*, (1962) by Diane Arbus (fig. 5) could be read as a documentation of one of these “freaks”, the child holding a hand grenade with a deformed hand. One viewer’s interpretation of this shot could be that it is an allegory of America itself, or at least American foreign policy of the time. This photograph, taken the same year as the Cuban missile crisis, seems strangely symbolic that America is like a delinquent kid with a hand grenade: unpredictable and dangerous. And so this image could seem to some just as relevant today as it no doubt was back in 1962.

![Image of a child holding a hand grenade.](image-url)

**Figure 5:** *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, New York City, 1962, Diane Arbus*

\(^{16}\) *Ibid.* p. 293.
\(^{17}\) Mason, Jerry et al. op. cit. p. 34.
\(^{18}\) *Ibid.*, p. 34.
There are numerous practitioners whose work fits this blend of urban landscape with social documentary photography. Lee Friedlander is one, who is also credited with coining a phrase that links these two main genres, namely “Social Landscape”. Friedlander was part of a new generation of photographers who took a documentary approach, but with a personal agenda. They sought not to reform life, but to understand it.  

Walker Evans was another. He had an idea that the United States might be made plain through an accumulation of detail. He was a frustrated writer who turned to photography, and strong parallels have been drawn between his style of picture making and certain literary forms. Evans worked intuitively studying the importance of the everyday. He wanted his photographs to “echo the writings of poets like Walt Whitman who used an accumulation of fact rather than more conventional symbolism to express the American Experience”.  

Whatever their approach or motivation, these practitioners’ images had something in common, and that is their ability to elicit a strong element of sadness. In his introduction to Robert Frank’s The Americans, the American Beat writer Jack Kerouac wrote about the sadness to be found in a photographic image. For Kerouac the main convention for the audience of a photograph is to be found in a sense of loss. Susan Sontag, in her celebrated critique On Photography (1977), suggested that photographs are intrinsically historical documents, and as such, they convey melancholy, through the transmission of that which is past or lost. There are many things that can enhance this sense of loss, but in particular it is subject matter and the context in which it is presented, and the subsequent relationship that the viewer draws from this content.

Berencce Abbott, well known for her urban landscapes of New York in the 1930s, said “the photographer is the contemporary being par excellence; through his eyes now becomes past”. Her book, Changing New York (1939), has a huge historical and archival significance, in that it records both the old before it disappears, and the new whilst in the process of being created. The rapid development in New York allowed Abbott to occasionally venture beyond this, recording the self-destructive replacement of the new, with the new. An inevitable consequence of documenting what could be termed the “cycle of rise and decline”, is the potential for a sense of melancholic loss.

Such work allows photography to span the gap from being simply a representation of a fragment of reality, to possessing the status of art. Roland Barthes argued for this dual nature of the photograph in his important theorisation of photography, Camera Lucida (1981). Barthes proposed the concepts of the “studium” and the “punctum”: the studium referencing the cultural and historical content of the image, and the punctum addressing the emotional response to that which is represented.

The author’s body of creative work titled Civic Melancholy reflects the above by contrasting the familiarity of the subject matter (or the “studium”), which is representative of our urban environment, with a subjective portrayal of our impact on that same environment.

---

(leading to the “punctum”). The viewer’s emotional response can be affected by the transience of the subjects depicted, and the perceived sense of loss in the images is accentuated by the fact that many of the locations depicted in the photographs have undergone considerable and permanent change by the time the images are exhibited. Thus the works serve to illustrate this sense of loss, of something past, through the photograph’s inherent connection with a “moment in time” (e.g. fig. 6).

Figure 6: Murrumbidgee Flour Mill, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe

The photographs are deliberately devoid of people (e.g. fig. 7), and whilst the compositions are deliberate and aesthetically disciplined, the subject matter is inherently less elegant (e.g. fig. 8). Nonetheless, even without people, only places, such urban landscapes still allude to the transience of human life (e.g. fig. 9). Indeed it could be argued that the absence of people in people-made environments enhances the impact of those people on those environments (e.g. fig. 10). Further, the photographs are often composed in a kind of “pulled back”, front-on perspective to enhance that impact (e.g. fig. 11). This causes the subject matter to sit rather uncomfortably in, or even isolated and distanced from what is left of the natural environment around it (e.g. fig. 12).
Figure 7: Coolamon Road Bus Shelter, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe

Figure 8: Auto Cabins Motel, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe
Figure 9: Emily, Coolgardie, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe

Figure 10: Wave Rock, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe
Figure 11: *South Campus Auditorium*, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe

Figure 12: *Silvertrees*, 2010, ©Jamie Holcombe
Since its very early days, the great Australian dream of suburban bliss on the quarter acre block has faced sporadic ridicule from both artists and writers, such as John Brack’s paintings of the 1950s, and Robin Boyd’s ferocious 1960 critique *The Australian Ugliness*. However, the days of more flagrant mockery of middle Australia are reaching their end, and it is assuredly not the author’s intention to maintain this recurring ridicule.

There is a more urgent agenda now, less condescending and essentially more collective, one of unanswered questions and all too easily dispelled challenges. Cities are in a constant state of change, repeatedly revealing new visual interconnections between the old and the new, redefining our “sense of place”. Furthermore, and contrary to popular opinion, disrespect for our surroundings is not just limited to a few arbitrary acts of graffiti by a disenchanted youth. Could civic neglect and environmentally unfriendly developments be simply evoking a grown-up form of delinquent vandalism? And could this in turn be influencing an ensuing response? Is there that much difference between a giant fast-food chain logo looming over a city skyline like some kind of corporate graffiti, and the comparatively modest tag of the lone graffitist?

So Civic Melancholy attempts the difficult task of luring viewers through the traditional means of pleasing their aesthetic sensibilities, and then presenting them with a challenge to reflect, as an active participant and contributor to the work, on the subject matter, not just the way it is presented. The images subsequently show more than just the literal, by scrutinizing the point between what others want us to know about the subjects, and that which can’t be hidden, or as Diane Arbus put it, “the gap between intention and effect”. Ultimately, it is hoped the work will play a positive role, by empowering the viewer through reminding them that our environment is a consequence of our collective behaviour.

### About the Author

**Jamie Holcombe**

Jamie Holcombe has a degree in Visual Arts majoring in photography from Sydney College of the Arts (Sydney University), and completed post-graduate studies in Art/Photography at the University of Newcastle. He is currently completing a PhD in fine art photography at Charles Sturt University, which is located in regional Australia. After implementing multimedia and photo-Imaging disciplines at Charles Sturt University, Jamie developed the Photography degree introduced on the Wagga Wagga campus of CSU in 2006, and he currently heads the program. He teaches and supervises undergraduate and postgraduate students in photography/photomedia. Jamie is an established practicing exhibiting artist, with numerous solo and group shows since 1978, and has concurrently gained extensive experience in the professional/industrial photographic arena. It is this hybrid professional background that has underpinned his teaching strategies in the Photography program at CSU.

---

27 Arbus, Doon, and Isreal Marvin (ed.). *Diane Arbus*, op. cit. p. 4.
Editors
Phillip Kalantzis-Cope, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA
Tamsyn Gilbert, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA

Editorial Advisory Board
Tressa Berman, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, USA; UTS-Sydney, Australia
Howard Besser, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York City, USA
Sean Cubit, The University on Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
Owen Evans, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK
Tamsyn Gilbert, The New School for Social Research, New York City, USA
Dina Iordanova, Provost, St Leonards College, University of St Andrews, Scotland
Douglas Kellner, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Phillip Kalantzis-Cope, The New School For Social Research, New York City, USA
Gunther Kress, Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK
Emanuel Levy, Professor/Author/Critic, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Mario Minichielo, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham, UK
Colin Rhodes, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia
Becky Smith, School of Theater, Film and Television, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Marianne Wagner-Simon, Director, Freies Museum Berlin, Germany

Please visit the Journal website at http://www.ontheimage.com for further information about the Journal or to subscribe.
The Image Community
This knowledge community is brought together around a common shared interest in the role of The Image. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book series—exploring the affordances of the new digital media.

Conference
Members of The Image Community meet at The International Conference on the Image, held annually in different locations around the world. The Conference was held at the University of California, Los Angles, USA in 2010 and at the Kursaal Congress Palace, San Sebastian, Spain in 2011. In 2012, the Conference will be held at the Higher School of Humanities and Journalism, Poznań, Poland.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars and teachers. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on YouTube.

Publishing
The Image Community enables members to publish through three mediums. First, by participating in The Image Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums—a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. The International Journal of the Image provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series The Image, publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our news blog, constantly publishing short news updates from The Image Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the image. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
## Common Ground Publishing Journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>AGING</strong></th>
<th><strong>ARTS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal  
Website: [www.Arts-Journal.com](http://www.Arts-Journal.com) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>BOOK</strong></th>
<th><strong>CLIMATE CHANGE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Book  
Website: [www.Climate-Journal.com](http://www.Climate-Journal.com) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT</strong></th>
<th><strong>DESIGN</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Constructed Environment  
Website: [www.Design-Journal.com](http://www.Design-Journal.com) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DIVERSITY</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOOD</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations  
Website: [http://Food-Studies.com/journal/](http://Food-Studies.com/journal/) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>GLOBAL STUDIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>HEALTH</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The Global Studies Journal  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>HUMANITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>IMAGE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Humanities  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>LEARNING</strong></th>
<th><strong>MANAGEMENT</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Learning.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>MUSEUM</strong></th>
<th><strong>RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SCIENCE IN SOCIETY</strong></th>
<th><strong>SOCIAL SCIENCES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Science in Society  
Website: [www.SocialSciences-Journal.com](http://www.SocialSciences-Journal.com) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SPACES AND FLOWS</strong></th>
<th><strong>SPORT AND SOCIETY</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Website: [www.sportandsociety.com/journal](http://www.sportandsociety.com/journal) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SUSTAINABILITY</strong></th>
<th><strong>TECHNOLOGY</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>UBIQUITOUS LEARNING</strong></th>
<th><strong>UNIVERSITIES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal  

For subscription information please contact  
[subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com](mailto:subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com)